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There are No Wrong Choices

Angelique K Adams

“There are no wrong choices.”

This past week I had to make one of the most difficult career choices I did not expect to make. I was offered an opportunity to leave my current position, after only 6 months, and retransition. I was offered a transition that would ask me to rebuild foundations I recently established.

The transition would provide a new position and a temporary contract. I would have new co-workers, new students, and a new office. I would have to relearn departmental politics and culture. The transition would bring a familiar city, closeness to my chosen family, and new career opportunities to further develop past relationships. However, what was most important to me was that this position brought forth new energy because it would bring me closer to communities I was missing in my current position.

The timeline was abrupt; two days after the offer came a conversation and a week later a decision needed to be made. Whenever I am asked to make any decisions that may change my life path, I consult with my chosen family, loved ones, mentors, and of course, my therapist. In this fact-finding and introspective process, I received a spectrum of advice and questions.

“Do what’s best for you.”

“It’s frowned upon to leave your position within the first 6 months. Especially for a lateral move.”

“Do it. You aren’t happy here. This will make things so much easier.”

“You have already started so many projects.”

“You owe the university nothing.”

Angelique Adams (she/her) received a B.A. in Public Health and a Minor in African American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, then completed her M.Ed. in Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration at The University of Vermont this past year. Angelique’s career passions are social justice education with a particular focus on issues that affect marginalized students, and bridging public health and student affairs practices as an avenue to center holistic student experiences.

“Your students are going to struggle with this news.”

“There are no wrong choices.”

There are no wrong choices. That is what I wanted to believe, yet it was hard for me to accept that it was true. Though I received countless words of affirmation and encouragement, the weight of feeling a strong obligation to my current position was overwhelming. I felt like I was letting down so many of the relationships I had just begun to build in the first six months of my current role. I held onto the idea that regardless of my mental and emotional health, I was not supposed to choose myself because I had not “earned my stripes” yet by working in an entry-level position for three to four years.

While going through the process of making this decision, I reconnected with a small group of my mentors in student affairs. During one conversation in particular, a mentor pointed out that I sounded like I was in turmoil. Embarrassed, I admitted that I was in turmoil because I wanted to do justice by my students and the initiatives I began when I first started. After a pause, my mentor told me something that changed my entire perspective about the situation.

“Angelique, womxn of color are always expected to hold the burden of everyone else’s emotions. Do not do that to yourself. Do not let that oppression decide for you.”

Hearing my mentor’s words was fundamental to how I decided to move forward with the decision to accept the opportunity to transition into a new role. At the center of the guilt I was feeling was an obligation to serve my students. Unlike at the University of Vermont (UVM), where I did not have the opportunity to build personal relationships with the majority of the students I worked with in my role, it was different at University of California (UC) Santa Cruz. I had students I deeply cared about and wanted to see grow within their roles as Resident Assistants. I had projects such as supervising a student-run cafe and leading the adaptation of residential curriculum within my colleges, and I worked alongside a constantly supportive colleague.

Even with all of these aspects of my role, I was not thriving. Though I was doing better since my time within the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at UVM, my healing journey was still fresh. I left graduate school incredibly hurt. In fact, it is hard to be writing this reflection piece as I hold the memories of my last year in Burlington which are bound up in complicated emotions about the many people I left in the back corners of my mind.

Yet throughout the week, while making the decision to start a new position, I thought of Vermont often. I thought about the peers in my cohort, wondered if they would choose a new position for their personal wellness, and if their communities would support that. I thought about what I wanted to forget, like the loss of friends who decided something different than everyone else. I thought about what sticks with me the most, that being a new professional was much different than my time in graduate school. That there are going to be people who are not willing to discuss social justice, professionals who do not care about misgendering you, and colleagues who will minimize the impact of microaggressive racist behavior. That I am more equipped to challenge dominant discourse, reflect on how I show up in different spaces, and do something about the impact I leave, when I leave a space.

Are there are no wrong choices? That idea may not be true. Choosing not to pay attention to myself, to value my own instincts, and believe that I know what I need best is a wrong choice and I will never make it again. Discrediting my own intuition is bound up in the oppressive systems that tell Black womxn that they do not deserve to be believed when they say that something about this does not feel right.

Thus, I choose to pay attention to the most important lesson from my time at UVM and act on it. My sphere of control is to role model for my students of color, for my queer students, for my immigrant students, and for myself that my resilience is choosing wellness and my resistance is to challenge anyone who says I should not. Representation matters within every office, but when those who create representation are unable to survive the institution, then the institution is the one that needs to change.

I owe it to myself to rebuild as needed, to deconstruct paths and build new ones when the timing is right. My experiences from UVM remind me that as much as I want to be there for my students, I am doing them a disservice by continuing to stay somewhere my heart is not. I owe it to them and myself because changes for the better are necessary for marginalized folks to survive.

I want to demonstrate to my students that they can always choose their own care, and to surround themselves with the communities that support that care. There needs to be more examples of community care like this, examples similar to those of mentors reminding us that we do not need to hold the burden of someone else's emotions. These pivotal connections that we develop in student affairs are essential to disrupting harmful patterns that leave professionals in vulnerable positions. These connections are what created this opportunity to begin a new position and what protect me as I continue to work in the field of Higher Education.

What I gained from my two years in graduate school and the first six months of this professional role is that I am grateful to be surrounded by those who uplift and support my holistic wellness as a part of my professional experience. I gained the wisdom to be intentional about the communities I build, so that when the time comes to make decisions such as this, my community will hold me. I am reminded that this experience pushes me to be the mentor who asks me not to erase the identities that influence my decisions. That mentor was a HESA alumnx, and I will strive to be that HESA alumnx for someone else.

In this next role, I intend to explore how to always move towards experiences and people who are invested in my choices to resist and unlearn. I want to unlearn the fear associated with choosing my wellness in the face of difficult moments. My resilience is bound up in my freedom to choose, and I will always remember that choosing myself is never wrong.